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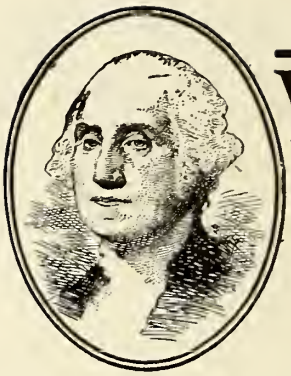

Washington and Lincoln

By John McGovern

Author of "Poems", "The Fireside University", "The Golden Censer", etc.

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

THE ANCESTOR

THE instinctive worship of our ancestors, that comes down to us along with a distressing number of worse things, makes us always ready to praise the dead at the expense of the living. At the same time, in excuse, there are periods of decay, as in France from the era in which St. Simon (the duke) begins to write until the smallpox fell on the Lord's annointed and the big Revolution began. Since Grant went into the White House, I have looked on the present age as another one of decay. First, it was gifts—horses and carriages, present of a house and lot by Morgan—then it was graft; now it is "honest graft," with the indignant honest grafters looking us dead in the eyes and asking us if we ourselves know any better way.

Casting about, over the world, is there a really great hero? Yes, Booth of London, although I, as much as any free man living, am annoyed by his terrific assaults on the bass drum and his making of fly-time a religious and perennial question. Dewey must be another hero, to judge by the way our glorious nation killed him off when it got jealous of him. Roosevelt may be another, but he is in a place more difficult than the Russian Witte took, and he is young and venturesome (but all great men are venturesome). The king of England is a fairly great man. The Japanese must have a great man or two on hand. In pure science the age is crowded with giants. I dare not enter on the splendid list. So, although we are morally as bad as they were under Louis XIV and Louis X, we still can point to great men — men whose honor, courage, fortune and genius attract the attention of good and bad alike. Even in the rotten times, there arose Frederick, who kept the whole rotten world at bay after stealing Silesia.

I am thinking all this while of George Washington. Ought I to praise him as an Ancestor, or for what he did actually do? Or, ought I to contrast him with honest grafters?—No, we need not do that. A man named Weems painted the Father of his Country with wings and a gold-leaf halo, but James Parton and other great chroniclers have corrected the personal error of Weems. We may, therefore, look at George Washington nowadays without getting out smoked glass. And for all that, he is truly a gigantic figure in all history.

Last November an English prince came over here with a squadron of battleships, and went down to Mount Vernon. At first they had him laying

a wreath on Washington's tomb. I did not like that. Then they corrected the report and had him bring away a branch of ivy. That was all right. About wreaths, let the prince lay one on the grave of Robert Emmett—charity begins at home. And what is his squadron of battleships for?—to knock off the top sixteen stories of the Park Row building in New York, or to blow the stanchions out of Pulitzer's dome. They come around with their battleships and we go out with ours. They say: "Look at this." We say: "See what we've got here." Just as small boys do—one of the crowd says, showing his left arm, bared, "Look-ye here: Six months in the hospital. And here"—the right arm—"sudden death." Then the other champion makes exactly the same maneuver. Now, gentle reader, how far off is the fight? Not very far.

As near as I can learn, a three-million battleship lasts just five minutes. The Henry George lecturers start out by saying that man is a land animal—but is he?

If I mistake not, patriotism is the most instinctive inherent trait of the body politic. Woe to the individual (that is, at swarming-time) who makes sport of that characteristic of the average man. George Washington needs no British praise; the British records have him down as rebel, traitor—which he was—over there. Kaiser Wilhelm was mistaken in establishing a statue of Baron Trenck's Frederick the Great at Washington; Cyrus Field was fatuous in putting up a monument to Major Andre at Tarrytown. Our honest grafting papas have sold large consignments of dizzy or calculating daughters to the highest bidders of the British peerage, but these papas are thereby not to be ancestors here. We daily pay them their honest graft, but we owe them no subscription. We do not like them nor their get.

Owing to George Washington, the United States is free and independent—and owing to him, also, somewhat united. It is not owing to him that our nation is obstreperous. Because of his astonishing patience, nerve and testy temper with subordinates, he is not buried under an English jail—for we must not forget that, in stuttering old King George's time, there were over two hundred crimes that were punishable with death, and George Washington and Sam Adams' crimes led all the rest—"What! What! What! This Colonel Washington, and this Master Adams—what, what, what!"—it was certainly hard on his majesty.

With so many Tories at New York, and so many peace-at-any-price Foxites at Philadelphia, all of them so stingy that they would make war-contributions only at the point of a bayonet—how did George Washington ever free his country? Well, he was a great retreater. Maria Theresa had such a marshal in old Daun. Wellington was cut on the same pattern. If the war had lasted fourteen years instead of seven, Washington might have been found fortified at Fort Dearborn, on the lake front at Chicago. They got tired of chasing him, and didn't believe he'd fight. He swore his big hands warm at Valley Forge; then Franklin, Beaumarchais, Lafayette and D'Estaing gave a little bee for his benefit near the Chesapeake Bay, and down pounced George Washington on Yorktown. Alexander Hamilton fought hard—(I do him honor, and charge it all to Washington, who liked him)—and presto! the colonies were free.

Would to God no honest grafter of the present day might take it to heart if I quote what Washington said at the time he told congress his army was "occuyping a cold, bleak hill and sleeping under frost and snow without clothes or blankets." He wishes he could bring "those murderers of our cause, the monopolizers, forestallers and engrossers to

condign punishment. I would to God that some of the most atrocious in each state was hung in gibbets upon a gallows five times as high as the one prepared by Haman." "Idleness, dissipation and extravagance seem to have laid fast hold of" the people, and "speculation, peculation and an irresistible thirst for riches seem to have got the better of every other consideration and almost of every order of men; party disputes and personal quarrels are the great business of the day."

II

How did the Ancestor look? Ackerson tells us: The Ancestor was big—looked six feet and a half—stiff as an Indian — mighty bad temper; eye almost white; face white; nose good and red (very cold weather, then); throat tied up; army boots number thirteen; gloves had to be surveyed and made for him; all bone and muscle and weighed only 200; it took two other men to put his big tent in a camp-wagon; he tossed it in with one hand. He had a great old mouth, that Ackerson thought was painful to look at—it would have been more painful for King George - What - What-What to gaze on. He could hold a musket in one hand and shoot as well as his companions could shoot with a pistol. His finger-joints were wonders. He was a huge eater, and to be hungry set him in a beautiful rage (to be seen, of course, from a distance). He drank a moderate amount of rum.

He was better even than Henry of Navarre. He was one of the world's heroes — primordial, medi-ordial, post-ordial, everlasting — astounding human fabric, woven always but not often "on the loud-sounding loom of time," as Carlyle loves to quote.

When the army became suspicious of congress and Colonel Nicola boldly asked Washington to be dictator, he "viewed the letter with abhorrence," "reprehended it with severity." "If I am not deceived in the knowledge of myself, you could not have found a person to whom your schemes are more disagreeable."

He stood at the wharf in New York City. "I shall be obliged," he said to his officers, "if each of you will come and take me by the hand." Tears were in his eyes. He said no more, but embraced them one by one, in the fashion of those days. They felt very lonesome and fatherless when he disappeared on the blue waters. He adjusted his accounts at Philadelphia, but charged no salary for all those years. He disbursed about $75,000 in all sorts of ways, and much of this he himself had advanced. He went into congress to read his Farewell. He drew his spectacles, saying, "You see I have grown old in your service." He walked out of the hall a private citizen. But he had left his people far too soon.

III

It had been a strange chapter. A tobacco planter of heroic build, with a noble self-assurance, had stopped fox-hunting to make war. He had tried one thing after another. A man of imperious authority over those near to him, he had exerted but little at a distance, because of his distaste for the distant exercise of power. He had fits of retreating and starts of formidable advancing; he had fought in mid-Winter and lain still in mid-Summer. Some years he had scarcely fought at all. Yet he had made several forays, quick movements, worthy of either Frederick or Napoleon. He had struck at Trenton, Monmouth and Yorktown with the genius of the first of captains.

What kind of a general would Washington have made if he had massed a big army? He did not have Frederick's heritage, opportunity, or dreadful dilemma. He had at heart, I believe, more fire than Wellington. He was at times as cautious as Marshal Daun. He was

also a founder of a new public thing—*res publica*—and ranks with Ahmes in Egypt, Moses in Israel, William in England and Peter in Russia. But he was in himself more like the giant-heroes of the Dark and Middle ages, for his armor and his lance were too heavy for his colleagues.

But perhaps the worst of his troubles remained. He supposed the thirteen colonies had at least courage enough to fight and win the battles of peace, so he went to Ohio to look after his private affairs. Thereupon the communists of Massachusetts set out to divide property, and New England concluded to erect a nation by itself. The best the most of them could figure out was three confederations, or nations, south of Canada.

The colonies passed tariffs against each other that even outdid what England had tried to do to Boston. To the horror of George Washington, the country, in a time of peace with foreign powers, was on the verge of anarchy. Only Virginia paid taxes to the Continental Congress at New York. Rhode Island and New Hampshire were particularly mean. While the big man at Mt. Vernon was seriously ill with the rheumatism, there came a feeble call for a federal convention at Philadelphia to frame a government that would avert the *morcellement* of North America. Chagrined and humiliated that he should be called upon, he traveled wearily to Philadelphia, where, of course, they made him president of the convention—but nearly all of the other delegates waited for him to arrive in Philadelphia first. Rhode Island never came at all. No body of men ever met with less encouragement. The convention sat for four months in perfect secrecy—that would be impossible in this immoral age. Franklin, Madison and Washington were there all the hot Summer. Hamilton got away—didn't help much until election. It looks to me as if Jefferson at Paris furnished the main idea—executive, legislative, judicial—through Madison, his disciple, who in turn received Washington's approval on all he attempted. Jefferson called the convention a convocation of demi-gods, but afterward thought they had given the president too much power and opportunity. Washington, little knowing his personal influence, returned in sorrow to Mt. Vernon, expecting anarchy. His own state developed serious opposition to his work. But all ended well.

Because the ancestor had signed this Constitution, it was adopted. The Constitution had fixed up a big office called the presidency, because Washington was a big man. When the electoral college met there was no vote for anybody else. Every elector, therefore, came away a hero.

Thus Washington saved his country twice. When we read the Constitution of the United States, we must construe it as we would a river and harbor bill. The fact that Delaware or Rhode Island has two senators is just like the paving of a dry creek in Pennsylvania at an expense of $100,000. To avert anarchy, the Constitution was log-rolled, and much to Jefferson's mortification. One should read Washington's letters roasting Rhode Island and New Hampshire. There was a long-headed Virginian named Mason, who foresaw war in state sovereignty. But he said, "We can at least put it off," and they did. Then Mason, queer man, tried to defeat the new Constitution.

IV

I would like to correct a widely prevailing impression that Washington leaned to Hamilton's ideas on government. Not at all. That was the reason Hamilton left the convention. Washington was as good a democrat as Jefferson and Madison. He heartily approved their doctrines and also had the genius and patience and prestige to adjust those

doctrines somewhat to weak and selfish human nature.

The first president of the United States, George Washington, entered the harbor of New York as impressively as Cleopatra floated up the river Cyndus. New York was pleased, because it looked as if he were king. But he said: "In our progress toward political happiness my station is new." No, he was not king. Yet he would shake hands with nobody, and he returned no calls. He would have liked to be called "His Highness" because he thought he held a sublime office. He logically appointed Jefferson in the cabinet—Jefferson, pupil of Rousseau and Sam Adams and Patrick Henry. He went to Boston to see Governor Hancock, and made poor, sick Hancock call on him first, dead or alive, —hence the American doctrine that in the United States the president, representing all the people, outranks everybody else.

One of the Jacobin editors, later on, said Washington "maintained the seclusion of a monk and the supercilious distance of a tyrant." And one of the most grotesque things I know of was the advance of the French Citizen Genet, carrying Equality or Death to George Washington!

Toward the end of his two presidencies he concluded to prepare his "mind for the obloquy that disappointment and malice" were collecting to heap on him. So, at the next leave-taking, he was glad to depart from one and all. But they were not merry. They again were lonesome. The hall was nearly emptied when Washington went out; a multitude followed him to his lodgings. And when he saw this once more he turned and bowed very low, and tears were in his eyes.

I almost know I shall be pardoned if I linger to transcribe that most remarkable paragraph of Lawrence Washington, the half-brother, wherein he mirrored George Washington in the front of Mary Washington, the woman who bore the Ancestor: "She awed me in the midst of her kindness. And even now, when time has whitened my locks, and I am the grandparent of a second generation, I could not behold that majestic woman without feelings it is impossible to describe. Whoever has seen that awe-inspiring air and manner, so characteristic of the Father of His Country, will remember the matron as she appeared when the presiding genius of her well-ordered household, commanding and being obeyed."

THE DICTATOR

THAT terrible question of the equal sovereignty of all sorts of states, which the war-worn fathers of 1787 had decided to leave to the armies of posterity, came to a sharp focus upon the election, as president, of a western pioneer who believed the Union could be maintained and at the same time that new states should prohibit slavery. He believed slavery was a necessary evil, and he had not the slightest notion of disturbing it in the South.

Thereupon the greatest civil war since feudal times broke out, and ended with the temporary subjugation of the South and the liberation and enfranchisement of the Africans. In that awful conflict this western pioneer, Lincoln, was commander-in-chief of the northern states' armies and navy. The suspension of the writ of habeas corpus and the erection of many military districts made him dictator for about four years. He could, and did, send for critics of his policy and put them in prison, just as the czar does.

This Dictator, personally, was one of the "characters" of the whole world's history. He was taller than the Ancestor himself—hardly anybody of the younger generations alive today realize how exceeding tall he was. He had

bigger feet and hands than Washington. He, also, like Henry of Navarre and George Washington, was a "strong man." Nobody ever fooled with him. While he was out in the spot-light of history, nobody ever got him fighting mad.

I never saw him. But I felt him plainly — telepathically — so did every other western Union person in the North. I was ten years old, at Lima, a hamlet of northwestern Indiana. He was at Springfield, Illinois, telling stories. Those yarns would reach our town commons in a week's time. The Douglas boys cried: "Hurrah for Lincoln, and a rope to hang him." Then we cried: "Hurrah for Douglas, and a nigger to skin 'im, and a bottle of whiskey to drown him in." We didn't believe Lincoln would be elected — he was too good a fellow—he didn't put on dignity, like the preacher, the doctor, the lawyer, the banker.

We, of course, thought he was more of an Abolitionist than he really was in 1860. We thought that hanging old John Brown ought to make an Abolitionist out of even Douglas—and practically it did.

II

There is a strong likeness between Lincoln leaving Springfield for Washington and George Washington leaving Mt. Vernon for Philadelphia, to see if there would be a constitutional convention. Both men were dreadfully blue — but Lincoln was well, while Washington had his arm in a sling from rheumatism.

Abraham Lincoln was the small boy's idol. But we thought he was too kind. He stood too much from Buell, McClellan, Halleck. We stopped playing sheep-in-the-pen to lament it. Young men would go by, wounded the week before at Shiloh or Stone River, and we would keep on playing, pretending we didn't see it.

Abraham Lincoln had to log-roll, too. He was forced to give cabinet positions to the ever envious Chase; to old Simon Cameron, who was no saint at all; and to Seward, to whom the nomination had naturally belonged, because he was a real emancipator. Lincoln had to keep Horace Greeley in good humor. He had two scorpions in his presidential basket, James Gordon Bennett in the East, Brick Pomeroy in the West. Both exploited the southern theory that Abraham Lincoln was "an anthropoid ape"—a gorilla. That was because Lincoln was not pretty, like Chase, or Sumner. Now Jeff Davis was no prize-taker either, and Abraham Lincoln could give him all sorts of odds on kindness.

III

But, above all, it is totally impossible to sketch Abraham Lincoln without his funny stories — they were frequently parables. For instance, when he arrived at Washington the radicals, of course, thought it was they who were elected. They thought in their hearts, "Now we've got ye," and wanted to know if he were going to ride to the capitol alone, or let Buchanan take him there, which was according to the custom. "That reminds me," said Lincoln, "of the witness in a lawsuit, who looked like a Quaker. When he arose to take the oath he was asked by the judge, who seemed puzzled, whether he wished to swear or affirm. 'I don't care a damn which,' said the witness."

A delegation asked the appointment of a man in delicate health, to go to the balmy latitudes of the Sandwich Islands. "Gentlemen," said Lincoln, "I am sorry that there are eight other applicants for that place, and they are all sicker than your man."

The office-seekers told Uncle Abe that he had been exposed to the small-pox. "I'm glad of it," he said, "for now I'm going to have something I can give to everybody."

A man wanted a pass into Richmond. "Happy to oblige you. Fact is, though,

I've given passes to 250,000 men to go to Richmond, and as yet not one has reached the place."

Fairfax was raided and a brigadier-general and a number of horses were captured. "Well, I'm sorry on account of the horses. I can make a brigadier-general in five minutes, but it isn't an easy matter to replace 110 horses."

He did not like the dress coats and kid gloves of the East. Gentlemen wearing this sort of outfit were hotly insistent that he should "free the negroes." "Where are you going, my son?" he said to Robert, seeing him in a dress suit. The son told him he was to attend a banquet given by Senator Sumner in honor of Professor Longfellow. "Go, my son," the president said, "but if you are able to hold a respectable conversation for fifteen minutes with those gentlemen, you'll do more than your father ever did." This Herndon tells, and I believe it.

III

Gradually everybody could see that it was "a war to free the negroes." There came draft riots in that same old city of New York that had grieved George Washington. There came Butternut and Copperhead conventions. Brick Pomeroy, old Storey at Chicago, and Bennett at New York, (like the newspaper called *Pere Duchesne* at Paris in 1793) were "in a furious passion tonight." The military criticism regarding Grant and Sherman was particularly sharp. Lincoln delivered Mason and Slidell to England, encouraged Juarez in Mexico; set down Vallandigham of Ohio within the Confederate lines; moderated the tone of Seward's documents; made peace as often as war. Finally, when the time was sufficiently ripe, he issued the preliminary Proclamation of Emancipation. On September 22, 1862, he informed all regions in rebellion, naming them and excepting certain counties, that their slaves would be free January 1, 1863, unless they ceased to defy the authority of the United States. It was not abolition as a principle—it was a threat of emancipation in rebellious regions as a measure of war. He called the members of the cabinet and, summarizing his thoughts and feelings, he told them this proclamation and no other would be issued. Governor Seward, secretary of state, suggested a slight change, which was adopted; a day or two later he suggested still another. which was likewise adopted. The president asked the governor why he had not mentioned both changes at once, but Governor Seward did not seem to give a satisfactory answer and left the room.

"Seward," said Lincoln, "reminds me of a hired man who came to a farmer and told him that one of a favorite yoke of oxen had fallen down dead. After a pause, the hired man added: 'And the other ox in that team is dead, too.' 'Why didn't you tell me at once that both the oxen were dead?' said the farmer. 'Because I didn't want to hurt you by telling you too much at one time.' "

He was more than pleased with the bravery shown by the colored regiments at Petersburg, for he had been bitterly opposed in commissioning them. He was talking to Grant. "I think, general, we can say of the black boys what a country fellow who was an old-time abolitionist in Illinois said when he went went to a theater in Chicago and saw Forrest playing 'Othello.' He didn't know the tragedian was a white man blacked up for the purpose. After the play was over, the folks who had invited him to go to the show wanted to know what he thought of the actors, and he said: 'Waal, layin' aside all sectional prejudices and any partiality I may have for the race, durned if I don't think the nigger held his own with *any* on 'em.' "

As Abraham Lincoln entered Richmond, the picture of the freed slaves gathering about him and hailing him

with sharp cries as their deliverer, would have convinced anybody that freedom is a precious thing in the opinion of those who have been denied it.

IV

They say he never forgot a face. When the soldiers came back after the war, a good many of them went to see Old Abe, and there is a story to show how tall he was. In 1840 he had taken dinner with a Sanagmon County farmer. Now this "embattled farmer" shook hands with the triumphant president.

"Yes," said Lincoln, "I remember you. You used to live on the Danville road. I took dinner with you when I was running for the legislature. I recollect that we stood talking at the barnyard gate while I sharpened my jackknife." "Ya-as," said the old soldier, "so you did. But, say, wherever did ye put that whetstone? I looked for it a dozen times, but I never could find it after the day you used it. We 'lowed as how mebby you took it along with ye." "No," said Lincoln, "I put it on top of that gate-post — that high one." "Well, mebby you did, now. Couldn't nobody else have put it up there, and none of us ever thought to look up there for it." The soldier was soon at home. He wrote at once to his friend Abe Lincoln that he had found the whetstone on top of the tall post, where it had lain untouched for fifteen years, and he did not think it would ever be lost again.

V

I have been witness of the sincere public grief at the times of the death of McKinley, Grant and Garfield, but now let me speak of the effect of Booth's deed. The people had been schooled in blood; the ghastly deeds of war were come to be familiar. But that Father Abraham was no more! — that an assassin, instead of bearing away the aid and consolation of Father Abraham, had slain him! — it surpassed even the infernal realities of war. There settled over the land a period of such gloom as history does not record of other epochs and ages. On the Sunday following, the Wednesday following, through the slow weeks thereafter, men heard the passionate sobbings of their eloquent of speech, and truly were broken-hearted in the general woe. It was like the Last Day is painted. It seemed the air was thick and sulphurous. Men were too sick with sorrow to call for vengeance, or to pronounce the name of the wretched man who had betrayed his race. It was an awful crime against Mercy, Charity, Peace — all the sweet angels.

Thus suddenly passed a great moral hero. He, more than any other man of whom the books preserve long narratives, was a living example of the efficacy of gentleness and moral suasion as auxiliaries of force and arms. In all our catalogues of men he stands as the foremost personal example of patience and forebearance. Patriots named him their savior; slaves hailed him their liberator; orphans considered him their father.

Without extinction is Liberty! without retrograde is Equality!
They live in the feelings of young men, and the best women;
Not for nothing have the indomitable heads of the Earth been always ready to fall for Liberty.

* * * * * *

For the Great Idea!
That, O my brethren, — that is the mission of Poets.

— *Walt Whitman* ("*Marches Now the War is Over.*")